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MEMORANDUM FOR THE RECORD

SUBJECT : Monday, 22 February 1971 Session with
Secretary Laird

PERSONS PRESENT: Secretary Laird, General Pursley, Mr. Carver

Our 22 February session lasted for about 40 minutes (1100 - 1140) and consisted of an informal rather free form conversation during which the points outlined below were covered, with some jumping back and forth among them.

1. Situation. I gave a brief resume of the current situation in north Laos, central Laos, south Laos, Cambodia and South Vietnam touching essentially on points covered in today's publications.

2. Press Problems. Secretary Laird, was concerned, with reason, about how the U.S. press is handling the Laos operation. He is persuaded that the press -- including major network presidents and newspaper publishers -- is irritated at current restrictions, particularly the defense department's refusal to carry American correspondents on American planes flying over Laos. Some of the critical reporting now being

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received is a reflection of that pique. Laird is privately inclined to believe that the situation would be improved if some of these restrictions were lifted, although the White House (according to him) is reluctant to relax them. He asked me point blank for my judgment. Replying that the matter is well outside of my professional parish, I expressed the personal opinion that there would probably be some net advantage in carrying the press on U.S. aircraft.

Stories written on the basis of things ~~that~~ they actually saw were unlikely to be any worse than stories already being concocted out of rumor and imagination by disgruntled reporters sitting in South Vietnam. Furthermore, we might get some benefit if reporters would see certain things not now being mentioned at all, e.g., the battle area around the ARVN ranger battalion's hilltop position littered with North Vietnamese corpses.

3. Edginess. At several points during our conversation the Secretary commented on the taut nerves displayed in Saigon and in Washington. I said I had already received some mutterings of complaint from the White House about CIA reporting on the extent to which the North Vietnamese were moving supplies through Laos. I noted that we were saying nothing ^{save} ~~say~~ that dictated by evidence.

Communist logistic entities were at least to be fulfilling most, if

not all, their current quotas, but our comments on this data made it very clear that such intelligence is hard to interpret since we had no present way of attaching tonnage or through-put numbers to these alleged quotas. Laird immediately replied that he had not at all intended to be critical of our publications for indeed, in his opinion, we were just doing our job and doing it very well. His remark was simply intended to illustrate the testiness now being displayed at the White House over any sign of difficulty in current operations. Pursley mentioned later that the White House had asked Laird's office to find and fire the Air Force general (unnamed) who was quoted today in the press as having said that the North Vietnamese, despite our pressure against them, were moving supplies through the Panhandle at a greater rate than ever before. (I did not get the impression that the Secretary's office intended to devote very much effort in trying to track down the identity of this general.) Laird noted that we were all going to have to make a greater effort to keep our cool and perspective in the weeks ahead.

4. Infiltration. I directed the Secretary's attention to the fact that on 17 February we had picked up more of the group's (2275) that we had clearly listed when it went through the "Vinh window" at BT 18. He also noted our disquiet

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at the several signs that the Vinh window was becoming opaque. I mentioned our conversation with Dr. McLucas on 21 February and briefed Laird on its substance.

5. The Chinese. Laird asked if I was comfortable with the recent published NIE on Chinese Communist intentions. I replied that it was a good piece of work, but that it had to be read very carefully and the various warning flags be heeded. We should not let ourselves be so blinded ~~xxx~~ by the 1950-51 Korea precedent that we ignored the fact the Chinese had a wide range of options of extremes of doing nothing and pouring across the frontier in multidivisional force. I noted that the 18,00 odd troops already stationed in Laos could be viewed as more than needed if the sole purpose of protecting the road construction and, further, that radar controlled 57mm antiaircraft guns were hardly necessary to protect against an occasional raid by a couple of T 28's. On balance, available evidence would not suggest massive Chinese Communist ground intervention in the Indochina struggle, but Peking was quite capable of muscle flexing in a manner devised to spook the U.S. Furthermore there was a strong body of ~~circumstantial~~^{it} evidence, none of which provable beyond reasonable doubt at this stage, that the Chinese had for a long time dispatched occasional observers, or, possibly technical

advisor missions to Communist forces in lower Laos, Cambodia or possibly even South Vietnam. Thus, we should not think that the sky was falling if at some point in the near future someone operating in Laos or Cambodia bagged some live ^{Chinese} army personnel or ran across bodies carrying documentation indisputably proving them to be members of the PLA. Laird professed himself in complete agreement with this analysis.

6. Maritime Operations. I spoke briefly of our session with Colonel Mayer on 19 February and explained that we were ~~xxx~~ ready to provide any technical support we could in maritime operations against North Vietnam. Laird expressed thanks to the assistance already rendered and then launched into a general discussion of these operations. Pursley was clearly opposed to them, Laird, ambivalent. I expressed the view that they had to be regarded in ^{political} rather than military terms, that if ordnance was going to be expended ~~xxxxxxx~~ it might as well be directed at something worth hitting. The North Vietnamese were clearly edgy about the security of their homeland and clearly uncertain about just what threats they had to prepare to defend against. I personally saw no reason to ease their heartburn and thus felt that pinprick raids -- which would almost certainly be exaggerated ^{if} they were reported up the chain of command --

were politically useful at this moment. Pursley asked how often such raids needed to be run to keep the pot bubbling. I replied that there was no fixed figure, but it seemed to me on the order of two or three in every four or five week period sounded about right provided the actual ~~intervals~~ intervals between them were irregular.

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9. Air Support. I told the Secretary that during the past week I had had ~~xx~~ several conversations with General Vogt who had in turn been in touch with General Clay on the matter of air support for north Laos. Everything seemed in train in that area and we had no ~~Complaints~~ about the fine cooperation we were getting from our ~~fine~~ military colleagues. Also, from our perspective the present system for authorizing ARC LIGHT strikes was ^{not} engendering any difficulties.